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CIA downplays Chinese army rift during massacre

By Bill Gertz
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CIA Director William Webster says U.S. intelligence agencies dismissed reports that rivalries within China's People's Liberation Army verged on civil war.

"We in the intelligence community never subscribed to that theory at this time," Mr. Webster said in an interview published Saturday in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. "I think there is no real indication that major sections of the army are defecting."

Mr. Webster said differences existed within the army over the handling of demonstrations prior to the June 3 massacre but that the infighting wasn't serious.

"Many of the soldiers did not want to participate in the brutal activity that took place, [while] others were less concerned about it or were under more iron control," said Mr. Webster, who was in St. Louis to speak at a graduation ceremony.

There was no evidence suggesting "that soldiers under their leaders were prepared to turn on other soldiers," Mr. Webster said. "We really don't know" about the accuracy of reports indicating rival military units were engaged in fighting, he added.

Calling the divisions within the military a "civil war" was a term used "too early, too soon, without clearly identifying the nature of the apparent skirmishes," Mr. Webster stated.

Mr. Webster said intelligence agencies were basing judgments of events in China on "bits and pieces" of information and were unable to confirm reports that reformist Communist Party leader Zhao Ziyang had been ousted.

Other U.S. officials with access to

intelligence data said "credible reports" from agents and electronic intercepts of military communications in and around Beijing provided the primary evidence of the split within the PLA.

The reports included information that troops of the 27th Army, which officials said launched an hourlong shooting spree in Tiananmen Square June 4 that killed hundreds, donned red armbands. The armbands were thought to be evidence of a military split and were meant to distinguish them from other troops thought to be disloyal to the Chinese leadership.

Units from several military divisions and brigades deployed in and around Beijing as part of the martial law crackdown, estimated at around 300,000 troops, took part in operations to quell the protests, the officials said.

The only military forces that appear not to have taken part in the violence were troops of the 38th Army, officials said. The reason, according to the intelligence reports, was children of some 38th Army commanders were among those killed in the clashes in Tiananmen Square.

Shots were also reportedly fired between soldiers, but officials said that information has been interpreted differently by U.S. analysts. Some analysts viewed the shooting between soldiers as evidence of a split within the army, while others saw it as the result of confusion and mistakes by younger troops.

Intelligence reports also have hinted that the Chinese air force wasn't united with the PLA officials in charge of martial law, officials said.